

Clinton's Loss?: A Q&A by Kathryn Jean Lopez

National Review. National Review Online; Interrogatory

Thursday, September 11, 2003

By Kathryn Jean Lopez

Richard Minter is a Brussels-based investigative journalist. His new book, *Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror* has just been released by Regnery. He spoke to NRO early today about the run-up to the war on terror.

Kathryn Jean Lopez: What did the Clinton administration know about Osama bin Laden and when did they know it?

Richard Minter: One of the big myths about the Clinton years is that no one knew about bin Laden until Sept. 11, 2001. In fact, the bin Laden threat was recognized at the highest levels of the Clinton administration as early as 1993. What's more, bin Laden's attacks kept escalating throughout the Clinton administration; all told bin Laden was responsible for the deaths of 59 Americans on Clinton's watch.

President Clinton learned about bin Laden within months of being sworn into office. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake told me that he first heard the name Osama bin Laden in 1993 in relation to the World Trade Center attack. Lake briefed the president about bin Laden that same year.

In addition, starting in 1993, Rep. Bill McCollum (R., Fla.) repeatedly wrote to President Clinton and warned him and other administration officials about bin Laden and other Islamic terrorists. McCollum was the founder and chairman of the House Taskforce on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare and had developed a wealth of contacts among the mujihedeen in Afghanistan. Those sources, who regularly visited McCollum, informed him about bin Laden's training camps and evil ambitions.

Indeed, it is possible that Clinton and his national-security team learned of bin Laden even before the 1993 World Trade Center attack. My interviews and investigation revealed that bin Laden made his first attack on Americans was December 1992, a little more than a month after Clinton won the 1992 election. His target was 100 U.S. Marines housed in two towering Yemen hotels. Within hours, the CIA's counterterrorism center learned that the Yemen suspected a man named Osama bin Laden. (One of the arrested bombing suspects later escaped and was detained in a police sweep after al Qaeda attacked the USS Cole in 2000.) Lake says he doesn't remember briefing the president-elect about the attempted attack, but that he well might have.

So it is safe to conclude that Clinton knew about the threat posed by bin Laden since 1993, his first year in office.

Lopez: What exactly was U.S. reaction to the attack on the USS Cole?

Minter: In October 2000, al Qaeda bombed the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen. Seventeen sailors

National Review September 11, 2003, Thursday

were killed in the blast. The USS Cole was almost sunk. In any ordinary administration, this would have been considered an act of war. After all, America entered the Spanish-American war and World War I when our ships were attacked.

Counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke had ordered his staff to review existing intelligence in relation to the bombing of the USS Cole. After that review, he and Michael Sheehan, the State Department's counterterrorism coordinator, were convinced it was the work of Osama bin Laden. The Pentagon had on-the-shelf, regularly updated and detailed strike plans for bin Laden's training camps and strongholds in Afghanistan.

At a meeting with Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Attorney General Janet Reno, and other staffers, Clarke was the only one in favor of retaliation against bin Laden. Reno thought retaliation might violate international law and was therefore against it. Tenet wanted more definitive proof that bin Laden was behind the attack, although he personally thought he was. Albright was concerned about the reaction of world opinion to a retaliation against Muslims, and the impact it would have in the final days of the Clinton Middle East peace process. Cohen, according to Clarke, did not consider the Cole attack "sufficient provocation" for a military retaliation. Michael Sheehan was particularly surprised that the Pentagon did not want to act. He told Clarke: "What's it going to take to get them to hit al Qaeda in Afghanistan? Does al Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon?"

Instead of destroying bin Laden's terrorist infrastructure and capabilities, President Clinton phoned twice phoned the president of Yemen demanding better cooperation between the FBI and the Yemeni security services. If Clarke's plan had been implemented, al Qaeda's infrastructure would have been demolished and bin Laden might well have been killed. Sept. 11, 2001 might have been just another sunny day.

Lopez: When the World Trade Center was first bombed in '93, why was it treated at first as a criminal investigation?

Miniter: The Clinton administration was in the dark about the full extent of the bin Laden menace because the president's decision to treat the 1993 World Trade Center bombing as a crime. Once the FBI began a criminal investigation, it could not lawfully share its information with the CIA - without also having to share the same data with the accused terrorists. Woolsey told me about his frustration that he had less access to evidence from the World Trade Center bombing - the then-largest ever foreign terrorist attack on U.S. soil - than any junior agent in the FBI's New York office.

Why did Clinton treat the attack as a law-enforcement matter? Several reasons. In the first few days, Clinton refused to believe that the towers had been bombed at all - even though the FBI made that determination within hours. He speculated an electrical transformer had exploded or a bank heist went bad.

More importantly, treating the bombing as a criminal matter was politically advantageous. A criminal matter is a relatively tidy process. It has the political benefit of insulating Clinton from consequences; after all, he was only following the law. He is not to blame if the terrorists were released on a "technicality" or if foreign nations refuse to honor our extradition requests. Oh well,

he tried.

By contrast, if Clinton treated the bombing as the act of terrorism that it was, he would be assuming personal responsibility for a series of politically risky moves. Should he deploy the CIA or special forces to hunt down the perpetrators? What happens if the agents or soldiers die? What if they try to capture the terrorists and fail? One misstep and the media, Congress, and even the public might blame the president. So Clinton took the easy, safe way out, and called it a crime.

Lopez: Bill Clinton was actually offered bin Laden? Could you set the scene a little and clue us in on why, for heavens sakes, he would not take advantage of such opportunities?

Minitzer: On March 3, 1996, U.S. ambassador to Sudan, Tim Carney, Director of East African Affairs at the State Department, David Shinn, and a member of the CIA's directorate of operations' Africa division met with Sudan's then-Minister of State for Defense Elfatih Erwa in a Rosslyn, Virginia hotel room. Item number two on the CIA's list of demands was to provide information about Osama bin Laden. Five days later, Erwa met with the CIA officer and offered more than information. He offered to arrest and turn over bin Laden himself. Two years earlier, the Sudan had turned over the infamous terrorist, Carlos the Jackal to the French. He now sits in a French prison. Sudan wanted to repeat that scenario with bin Laden in the starring role.

Clinton administration officials have offered various explanations for not taking the Sudanese offer. One argument is that an offer was never made. But the same officials are on the record as saying the offer was "not serious." Even a supposedly non-serious offer is an offer. Another argument is that the Sudanese had not come through on a prior request so this offer could not be trusted. But, as Ambassador Tim Carney had argued at the time, even if you believe that, why not call their bluff and ask for bin Laden?

The Clinton administration simply did not want the responsibility of taking Osama bin Laden into custody. Former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger is on the record as saying: "The FBI did not believe we had enough evidence to indict bin Laden at that time and therefore opposed bringing him to the United States." Even if that was true - and it wasn't - the U.S. could have turned bin Laden over to Yemen or Libya, both of which had valid warrants for his arrest stemming from terrorist activities in those countries. Given the legal systems of those two countries, Osama would have soon ceased to be a threat to anyone.

After months of debating how to respond to the Sudanese offer, the Clinton administration simply asked Sudan to deport him. Where to? Ambassador Carney told me what he told the Sudanese: "Anywhere but Somalia."

In May 1996 bin Laden was welcomed into Afghanistan by the Taliban. It could not have been a better haven for Osama bin Laden.

Steven Simon, Clinton's counterterrorism director on the National Security Council thought that kicking bin Laden out of Sudan would benefit U.S. security since "It's going to take him a while to reconstitute, and that screws him up and buys time." Buys time? Oh yeah, 1996 was an election year and team Clinton did not want to deal with bin Laden until after it was safely reelected.

Lopez: This amazes me every time I hear it: You write, "When a small plane accidentally crashed

into the White House lawn in 1994, West Wing staffers joked that it was [Jim] Woolsey trying to see the president..." How could the CIA director have that bad a relationship with his president? And this, after the first WTC attack. Did no one in the West Wing get it?

Miniter: Never once in his two-year tenure did CIA director James Woolsey ever have a one-on-one meeting with Clinton. Even semiprivate meetings were rare. They only happened twice. Woolsey told me: "It wasn't that I had a bad relationship with the president. It just didn't exist."

One of the little scoops in the book is the revelation that Clinton froze Woolsey out because the CIA director refused to put a friend of Bill on the agency's payroll. This account was confirmed by both Woolsey and the Clinton's consigliere Bruce Lindsey.

Considering the Justice Department's experience with Webster Hubbell, another Friend of Bill, Woolsey's decision may have done the CIA a great deal of good. But Clinton's pique did not make America any safer from bin Laden.

Another Clinton intelligence failure involved a refusal to help the CIA hire more Arabic language translators. In 1993, Woolsey learned that the agency was able to translate only 10 percent of its Arabic intercepts and badly wanted more translators. But Sen. Dennis DeConcini refused to approve the funds unless Clinton phoned him and said it was a presidential priority. Despite entreaties, Clinton never phoned the Democratic senator and the CIA didn't get those translators for years.

Lopez: In sum, how many times did Bill Clinton lose bin Laden?

Miniter: Here's a rundown. The Clinton administration:

1. Did not follow-up on the attempted bombing of Aden marines in Yemen.
2. Shut the CIA out of the 1993 WTC bombing investigation, hamstringing their effort to capture bin Laden.
3. Had Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, a key bin Laden lieutenant, slip through their fingers in Qatar.
4. Did not militarily react to the al Qaeda bombing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
5. Did not accept the Sudanese offer to turn bin Laden.
6. Did not follow-up on another offer from Sudan through a private back channel.
7. Objected to Northern Alliance efforts to assassinate bin Laden in Afghanistan.
8. Decided against using special forces to take down bin Laden in Afghanistan.
9. Did not take an opportunity to take into custody two al Qaeda operatives involved in the East African embassy bombings. In another little scoop, I am able to show that Sudan arrested these two terrorists and offered them to the FBI. The Clinton administration declined to pick them up and they were later allowed to return to Pakistan.
10. Ordered an ineffectual, token missile strike against a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory.

National Review September 11, 2003, Thursday

11. Clumsily tipped off Pakistani officials sympathetic to bin Laden before a planned missile strike against bin Laden on August 20, 1998. Bin Laden left the camp with only minutes to spare.

12-14. Three times, Clinton hesitated or deferred in ordering missile strikes against bin Laden in 1999 and 2000.

15. When they finally launched and armed the Predator spy drone plane, which captured amazing live video images of bin Laden, the Clinton administration no longer had military assets in place to strike the archterrorist.

16. Did not order a retaliatory strike on bin Laden for the murderous attack on the USS Cole.

Lopez: You sorta defend Clinton against "wag the dog" criticisms in regard to that infamous August 1998 (Monica times) bombing of a pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan and some bin Laden strongholds in Afghanistan. That wasn't the problem, was it - that we fired then?

Miniter: Certainly the timing is suspicious. The day before the East African-embassy bombings, Monica Lewinsky had recanted her prior affidavit denying a sexual relationship with Clinton. The sex scandals kicked into overdrive.

Still, the president wasn't doing too much in combating bin Laden because of his sex scandals - he was doing too little. He should have launched more missile strikes against bin Laden and the hell with the political timing. Besides, after the East African-embassy bombings, any president would have been negligent not to strike back. If he had not, it would be open season on Americans. He would have been as ineffectual as Carter was during the Tehran hostage crisis. Indeed, this was the mistake made following the attack on the USS Cole.

But Clinton was distracted by sex and campaign-finance scandals and his political support was already heavily leveraged to get him through those scandals. If he fought bin Laden more vigorously, the leftwing of the Democratic party might have deserted him - which could have cost him the White House.

Instead Clinton's token, ineffectual missile strikes that only emboldened bin Laden. He believed that America was too intimidated to fight back - and was free to plan one of the most-murderous terrorist attacks in history.

Lopez: How did George Tenet perform during the Clinton years vis-a-vis al Qaeda/bin Laden?

Miniter: Tenet seemed to take a too legalistic view of CIA operations. He was risk-averse, wanting almost absolute certainty before recommending action, focused on safeguards against error and unintended consequences. Tenet seemed more concerned with not getting in trouble rather than relentlessly pursuing results to safeguard Americans against terrorism, the focus of a warrior.

Each time U.S. intelligence pinpointed bin Laden, Tenet was against a missile strike on the grounds that the information was "single threaded" - a pet phrase of the director which means single source. The predator was armed and fitted with video cameras mostly to overcome Tenet's

objections to taking out bin Laden.

Lopez: Madeline Albright - frequently called upon expert nowadays - what's her record vis-a-vis al Qaeda?

Miniter: Albright always insisted that diplomatic efforts would best yield results on bin Laden. Even after the Cole bombing, Albright urged continued diplomatic efforts with the Taliban to turn him over, even though that effort had been going on for two years with no progress. Two simple facts should have made Albright aware that the Taliban would never turn over bin Laden: Osama had married off one of his sons to Mullah Omar's daughter. The Taliban weren't about to surrender a member of the family - especially one that commanded thousands of armed fighters who helped maintain Omar's grip on power.

Lopez: What exactly is the Iraq-al Qaeda connection?

Miniter: Osama bin Laden's wealth is overestimated. He had been financially drained during his years in Sudan and financing terrorist operations in dozens of countries, including training camps, bribes, etc., requires a large, constant cash flow. Saddam Hussein was unquestionably a generous financier of terrorism. Baghdad had a long history of funding terrorist campaigns in the bin Laden-allied region that straddles Iran and Pakistan known as Beluchistan. Documents found in Baghdad in April 2003 showed that Saddam funded the Allied Democratic Forces, a Ugandan terror group led by an Islamist cleric linked to bin Laden since the 1990s. Saddam openly funded the Iraqi Kurdish Group and its leader, Melan Krekar, admitted that he met bin Laden in Afghanistan. George Tenet testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee that Iraq had provided training in forging documents and making bombs. Farouk Harazi, a senior officer in the Iraqi Mukhabarat reportedly offered bin Laden asylum in Iraq. Salah Suleiman, an Iraqi intelligence operative, was arrested in October 2000 near the Afghan border, apparently returning from a visit to bin Laden. One of the 1993 World Trade Center bombers, Abdul Rahman Yasin, reportedly fled to Baghdad in 1994. Iraq ran an extensive intelligence hub in Khartoum; Sudanese intelligence officers told me about dozens of meetings between Iraqi Intel and bin Laden. Tellingly, reports that Mohamed Atta met with Iraqi intelligence agents in Prague several times in 2000 and 2001 have not been disproved. I have far more on this in Appendix A of Losing bin Laden.

Lopez: What most surprised you to learn about the Clinton years and terrorism?

Miniter: Three things:

- 1) That the Sept. 11 attacks were planned in May 1998 in the Khalden Camp in southeastern Afghanistan, according to American and British intelligence officers I interviewed. In other words, the 9/11 attacks were planned on Clinton's watch.
- 2) The sheer number of bin Laden's attacks on Americans during the Clinton years.
- 3) And how much senior Clinton-administration officials knew about bin Laden and how little they did about it.

Lopez: This sounds like this could all be right-wing propaganda. How can you convince readers otherwise?

Miniters: Most of my best sources were senior Clinton officials, including both of his national-security advisers, his first CIA director, Clinton's counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, Madeline Albright, and others. Plus, I interviewed scores of career federal officials. None of them are card-carrying members of the vast right-wing conspiracy.

And, while I shine the light on Clinton's shortcomings in dealing with bin Laden, I also give credit where it is due. Chapter nine is all about one of the greatest (and least-known) Clinton victories over bin Laden - the successful thwarting of a series of plots to murder thousands of Americans on Millennium night, 1999.

If anyone has any doubts about the credibility of this book, they should read the acknowledgements, which list many of my sources. Or peruse the more than 15,000 words of footnotes, that allow the reader to see exactly where information is coming from. Or examine the intelligence documents reproduced in Appendix B. Or pick a page at random and read it. Any fair-minded reader will see a carefully constructed and balanced account that attempts to lay out the history of Clinton and bin Laden.

Copyright 2003 National Review